

Larry Fabulous

It's midday. So it's a surprise to find myself in the pub when I should be at work. I tell the landlord, who I know well, that I don't feel like it today. I'm not ill, I just don't feel like it. There are a couple of old-timers propping up the bar, so I pay for my pint and go through to the lounge area to be on my own.

The lounge area is a small, square room with four tables surrounded by cheaply upholstered, leatherette benches with a few stools in the middle to fill the spaces. I'm at the table nearest the door. To my right is table number two and across from me, table number three and four. They used to do food here but the landlord decided a few years ago to convert the kitchen into a pool room.

And then I see it. On the bench opposite me is a watch. I stand up, walk over to the other side of the room, pick it up and return to my seat. I've never worn a watch in my life and realise why people do, especially one as elegant as this. The dial is big and bold and says look at me. It says quarter-past-twelve and you should be at work.

I turn it over and see engraved on the back in smooth, swirly writing, neither too big nor too small, the name Larry Fabulous.

I look around the lounge area with its exhausted décor and faded maritime paintings screwed onto the wall. I think of all the names that must have sat in this room over the years, drinking, farting, snogging, smoking, singing. How many Joneses, Smiths, Evanses, Turners have joked, laughed, shouted and sworn between these walls. How many Davids, Edwards, Johns, Nancys, Sarahs and Louises have talked, gossiped, chatted and nattered sitting at these tables.

I look at a painting of a sailing ship moored in the docks and have a swig of my beer. Why would somebody with a name like Fabulous come into a low-life

drinking pit such as this. Why would this seemingly sophisticated man lose something so dear to him without coming back to reclaim it?

As I stare at the paintings on the walls, I can only conclude that the watch in my hand is stolen - the offender leaving it behind, either too drunk to notice, or too guilty to care.

And so the dilemma.

The landlord of the pub isn't the honest chap everybody takes him for. The regulars think he's a genuine guy, a real character who would step over hot coals to make you happy. The generous landlord who would give away his beer if he didn't need to make a living. But I know him. I know about the missing charity boxes, the cheap imported beer, the diluted spirits. Why should I let him take it down to the pawnbroker the minute I hand it in, when I could do it myself?

Because it isn't mine. It's Larry's. I could take the watch and wear it forever but it still wouldn't be mine. I could score off the name but the outcome would be the same. It doesn't matter if this Fabulous character is a murderer, an aid worker, a sinner or a saint. The simple fact remains, the watch isn't mine.

And so the plan.

I decide that I'll find him myself. I'll be the one who gives it him back and then I'll be able to judge him for who he is. Until then, he's just a man who has lost his watch. Nothing more nothing less. If he chooses to give me a reward, a simple thank-you, or even a punch in the face, that's his business not mine.

I leave the pub and go to work where I hand in my notice. They are shocked and ask me why and what I'm going to do. I say that I'm going away and they shouldn't worry about me. After a few handshakes from the guys and hugs from the girls, I head home and dig out a map of the town where I live.

I'm going to knock on every door on every street and ask if Larry Fabulous lives there. If he doesn't, then I continue to the next, and the next, for as long as it takes. Eventually, I would find him. It would become my purpose in life to find Larry Fabulous.

The next morning I get up early and start my search.

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I'm sitting in the pub where it all began and have just bought a pint of beer with the last of my money. It's two years since I started my quest and I'm no nearer to completing it.

After failing to find him in my own town, I decided to look in the next, until I had knocked on every door of the small island nation where I live. I've knocked on over half-a-million doors and asked the same question to everyone. But no-one has ever heard of Larry Fabulous. No-one.

I've sold my furniture, my car, my possessions and my house. And for what? Did I ever really think I would find him? Probably not. But over the past two years I've seen every inch of the country I was born in, met the wildest of people and had the craziest of times. That I've failed in my quest is not my fault, or indeed important anymore.

I finish my drink and head down the road to the jewellers. I hand the watch to the proprietor and ask him how much he'll give me for it. He takes it and starts inspecting it with his pencil-like fingers. When he notices the name on the back he looks at me with an expression as blank as the dusty cabinets behind him.

If I had come in here two years ago, I would have felt like a common thief. But now it's different. If Larry Fabulous was out there, I would have found him. But he isn't, I can prove it. Half-a-million households, an entire nation can prove it.

His eyes begin searching for signs of weakness, desperation and poverty. He wants to know before he makes his first offer, what condition my clothes are in, whether I've been drinking, have I eaten, have I got a place to sleep. I can see by the way his eyes dance over me, gathering information like a machine that he's done this a million times before. A seasoned professional who knows what price to start at and where to finish.

But I already know what I want and won't settle for anything less. I know exactly how much it's worth because it's been valued more times than any other watch in history. Every person in every house, business, bar, café I visited on my travels offered me an opinion on how much it was worth. By the end of my travels I had valuations ranging from a few coppers to entire fortunes and everything in between. So when the proprietor finally gives me his offer, I laugh, shake my head and tell him my price.

I can see he's a bit taken aback by my cocksure demand, so I keep silent and wait. He knows I've given him a good price, but I can tell by the way his mouth has started twitching up at the sides that he wants to push me.

For the first time in my life, I feel totally in control. It doesn't matter how long the man turns the watch over in his palm with his expert fingers, twitches his mouth, or shuffles his feet, I know I'll get my price. It's a rare feeling to know nothing could possibly go wrong, to feel so patient and at ease. I could wait here all day until it was time for him to close his shop, have his tea, and go to bed.

He twitches one more time, grunts and presses a button on his cash register releasing the money drawer below. I know he doesn't need to do this but I guess it's all part of his routine when it comes to closing a deal.

He looks into the drawer, turns the watch over in his hand once more, looks at me squarely and offers me the price I want. The deal is done. The quest is over.

He hands me the money and within a minute, I'm walking down the road to the station with a smile on my face no-one has ever seen before. I'm not sure where I'm going or why. All I know is that I'm glad that I've changed my life, glad to be someone different. Glad to be Larry Fabulous.